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U.S. intelligence probes Salvador right 'death squads'

SAN SALVADOR (AP) — The U.S. Embassy, for the first time, is devoting significant intelligence resources to find out who is behind alleged rightist "death squads" accused of killing thousands of civilians here, U.S. officials say.

The decision to investigate is seen partly as a move to pressure Salvadoran rightists to reduce human rights abuses, which some American officials say are jeopardizing continued U.S. aid.

The investigation also follows a Sept. 22 report by the House Intelligence Committee criticizing U.S. intelligence agencies for the "dearth of firm information" about who is responsible for the violence in El Salvador.

Critics of U.S. aid to this Central American nation have complained that the Reagan administration has twice certified that El Salvador's government is making a "concerted and significant effort" to respect human rights while having little investigative evidence to back that conclusion.

Twice-annual human rights certifications are required by Congress for continued U.S. aid to El Salvador. The next certification is due in January.

Last month, in a break with the administration's "quiet diplomacy," U.S. Ambassador Deane R. Hinton lashed out at rightist "thugs" who kill civilians and warned that \$320 million in U.S. aid might be stopped if the Salvadoran government didn't act.

"You don't have to kill people in the night. You don't have to decapitate people" to defeat leftist guerrillas, Hinton told a luncheon of Salvadoran businessmen. "The Mafia must be stopped."

One official said that despite Hinton's reference to "the Mafia," the death squads were probably not that highly structured, and there was little likelihood that a single "godfather" was directing their activities. He said authority appeared more diffuse.

The official also said a risk of the investigation is that it might incriminate high-ranking officials or other politically influential Sal-

vadorans and thus further damage U.S. public support for the Salvadoran government.

However, a State Department official said he doubted high-ranking involvement would be found. He contended that much of the rightist violence appeared to come from rural civil defense groups that have been resistant to central government authority.

In action yesterday, government soldiers at a fortified town northeast of the capital beat back an attack by more than 200 leftist insurgents in heavy fighting that left 25 rebels dead, a Defense Ministry spokesman said.

The spokesman said only four soldiers were wounded, but a local military commander said the army suffered "heavy casualties."

In neighboring Honduras, the government announced it has suspended all joint military exercises with U.S. forces to reduce tension in Central America in preparation for President Reagan's visit next week.

"There will be no military maneuvers with the United States before or after President Reagan's visit to Honduras Dec. 4," government spokesman Amilcar Santamaria said. The decision was taken "in order to help pacify the region," he said, but he did not say whether any exercises had been planned.

Government officials had said earlier that other joint exercises were planned, possibly in early December, but gave no details.

The State Department says El Salvador is no longer a very dangerous place and has told American Embassy personnel they may bring back dependents evacuated in 1980, an embassy spokesman said.

The staff will lose 25 percent in extra hazardous pay, but will keep a 15 percent differential because El Salvador is considered a hardship post.

Diplomatic sources estimated the move affects about 100 Americans, roughly half of them diplomats, who make \$20,000 to \$60,000 a year in basic pay. The measure becomes effective on Sunday.